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ABSTRACT

This booklet for teachers and administrators presents suggestions for addressing the needs of homeless children as they enter school, and for helping the children feel safe, comfortable, part of the group, able to contribute and participate, and important and valued. Tips and recommendations are presented under the following headings: (1) school enrollment; (2) school orientation; (3) student assessment; (4) the classroom; (5) academics; (6) homework; (7) additional considerations; and (8) help that parent/teacher or volunteer organizations can provide. The booklet concludes by listing educators' objectives for homeless students and by referring readers with questions to the Maine Department of Education's Office for Homeless Education. (AC)

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Suggestions for Helping Homeless Children and Youth in Schools

Maine Department of Education
Office for Homeless Education
State House Station #23
Augusta, Maine 04333

1991

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The Best Chance for Success

Schools provide the best chance for a child's future success. All children have the right to receive an education and experience success in school.

Adequate shelter, however, is not a constitutional right. The lack of such shelter can seriously infringe upon the rights of homeless children to receive their educational entitlement.

Presented here are suggestions and ways to address the needs of all children with a focus on the homeless child as he or she enters your school. Although the problem of homeless children may have evolved out of months or years of chaos and dysfunction, many of the resources and strategies already in place in your school can be tapped or redirected to successfully address their needs.

Homeless students need to feel -- and be --

- Safe, not threatened.
- Comfortable.
- Part of the group, not isolated.
- Able to contribute to and participate in the life of the school.
- Important and valued.

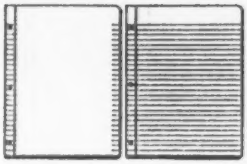
Thoughts for

School Enrollment

Having the details worked out before the child enrolls in your school can give you a headstart in helping these children.

Here are a few basics:

- Be friendly and welcoming to both child and parent(s) or guardian(s).
- Explain the need for an address (permanent or temporary), and reassure parents you will keep address information confidential in cases where there is domestic violence.
- Offer help in completing forms. Hesitation may indicate an inability to read.
- Provide free and reduced lunch forms and assist in filling them out.
- Obtain addresses of the child's former school(s). More than one address may be necessary to track records. Ask how long the student attended previous schools to help determine the addresses you will need.
- Provide a list of agencies and services that offer help to those new in the area.
- Show the parent and the child around your school.
- Make classroom placement based on the class composition, the child's needs, and the teacher's strengths.
- Be willing to contact agencies to obtain: birth certificates; immunizations or immunization records, so that the homeless child has a one-stop registration process.
- Designate a person in the district to assist homeless children and parents in making the school choice.



School Orientation

Orientation can be made easier, as well.

For example:

- Prepare a desk and materials before the child enters the classroom, as a show of welcome.

- Have a buddy system in place for all new students -- to provide companionship and to explain the rules.
- Have the school counselor meet with the homeless child soon after admission.
- Have a list of resources and agency contact persons so that any needs or concerns that arise can be handled rapidly.
- Tactfully prepare other students by giving some background information regarding homelessness.

Student Assessment

Since records may not arrive as soon as you need them,

- Teacher observation and informal assessment will be particularly important.
- The informal reading inventory and a mathematics test may be appropriate for an immediate assessment. But keep in mind that reevaluation may be necessary once the student has adjusted to the school.
- An interview with parent(s) or guardian(s), if available, can supply important background information about the child

The Classroom

Your current techniques and strategies can be adapted to become your most effective tools in working with a homeless child.

In the classroom, keep expectations high and goals attainable; but be empathetic to the homeless child's needs, concerns, and feelings.

Some ideas:

- Create a neutral, fair and friendly environment. (Do not expect homeless children to necessarily be responsive to your warmth. They have had many hurts, and healing takes time.)
- Assign the child a specific seat and/or provide other personal space (such as a cubicle).
- Keep a consistent daily schedule. Whenever possible, inform students ahead of time if a teacher will not be in school the next day or if an activity is to be substituted.
- Keep all of the furniture in the room in the same place.
- Minimize grouping students by ability.
- Incorporate information about the experiences of homeless children into classroom discussion and assignments, as appropriate.
- Post classroom rules. Keep them clear and concise.
- Monitor attendance, and provide appropriate follow-up when a student is absent.
- Employ classroom-management techniques which use positive disciplinary methods.
- Use teaching strategies such as cooperative learning to nurture the homeless child's feeling of belonging.

- Plan ahead for the homeless child. Make sure the student has easy access to assistance, in case of academic or personal difficulties. Arrange transportation for special activities well ahead of time.
- Encourage the child to ask questions. Provide appropriate praise for answers. (In other circumstances, the child's questions may have been met with anger.)
- Develop self-monitoring techniques. Ask, "What helped you do this well?"
- Provide choices. These should not be open-ended: give the student two or three appropriate alternatives.
- Praise specific pieces of work. "That's the best letter on the page." "That math problem was done correctly."
- Keep a folder of the child's work. (There may be no place for this recognition at "home.") Use the folder to remind the child of accomplishments.
- Build trust. Start each day by:

    - Addressing students by name.
    - Telling them you are glad to see them.
    - Reminding the children about something good they did recently.
    - Telling the students you're looking forward to your time together.

- Invite and welcome parents or guardians (if available) into the classroom.

Academics

In terms of academic strategies, you may wish to:

- Teach skills such as listening, following directions, and asking for help -- to increase the child's self-esteem and help develop social skills.
- Use learning style theory.
- Apply cooperative learning -- to promote participation in and control of the learning, and to present opportunities for interaction among students.
- Use mastery learning techniques:

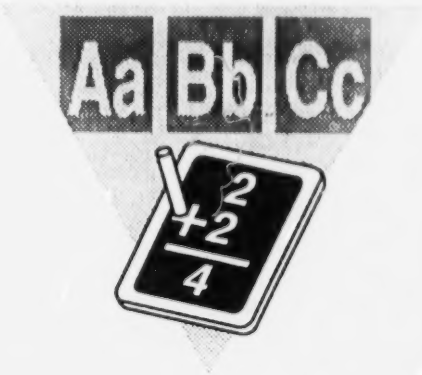
    - Provide direct instruction, including guided practice and reteaching to the objective.
    - Break the subject matter into small, meaningful pieces and teach to a specific objective.
    - Provide direct feedback to the student.

- Give the student enough time to answer a question. Or provide an additional clue, so the question can be answered more easily.
- When possible, give assignments which require the student to check with you daily, so that any work completed will be noted, and noticed.
- Introduce peer tutoring. Have a compassionate student help the homeless student. Let the homeless student tutor a younger one.
- Use a variety of instructional techniques including computer-assisted learning.

Homework

You may feel it is important that students be assigned homework. To help the homeless student meet that objective, you might consider the following:

- Give the student a clipboard to take home, as a portable desk to work on.
- Avoid TV assignments. There may be no TV, or the student living in a shelter may not make program choices for the group.
- Offer tools to complete any required task. School supplies may not be readily available for the child.
- Break semester-long assignments, journals, and research projects into small sections, with deadlines.
- Provide a place to study before and/or after school.
- Have effective strategies for communicating with parents about homework expectations.



Additional Considerations

Inside and outside the classroom, what may be taken for granted by another child may be highly problematic for a homeless child.
These suggestions may help:

- Gym clothes or other clothing may need to be provided. If so, try to find a source to donate them and develop some private arrangements for providing them to the child.*
- Birthday or other treats for young homeless children to share with classmates could be provided by volunteers.*
- Many homeless children come to school without breakfast. Provide breakfast, or try keeping dry cereal or crackers available throughout the day.
- Sharing may be difficult for the homeless child. Keep in mind that any possession may be the child's only one. Show and tell activities may also be difficult for homeless children. A $75 skateboard is a hard act to follow. So are the compositions about "where I went on vacation" or "what I got for Christmas."
- If cleanliness is an issue, arrange for the student to use the locker room shower on arrival at school and, if necessary, the school washer and dryer.*
- Help students make plans for transportation for after school activities or other special events.
- Homeless students may be insecure about removing coats or hats and placing them in a "distant" closet. Negotiate. Let the child keep the hat in a pocket, the coat on the back of a chair.

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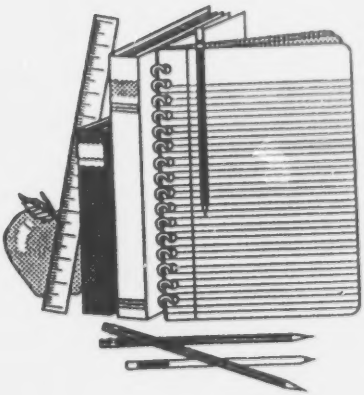
*If child lives with his/her parents, consult with them about the provision of these items and the most appropriate way to provide them.

- Making friends is difficult for all students, but more painful for the homeless. You may wish to provide a time and place for the homeless child to meet with friends.
- Have the children compile their own "book" of work and mementos. They may take it with them as a memory book upon leaving the school. Another class "book" with contributions from every student, to remain at the school, will help the children to know they are not forgotten if or when they leave the school for another.
- Send copies of school newsletters, calendars, or notices of sporting events to the shelter for posting.
- You may want to reevaluate existing school policies that affect homeless students. Tardiness or sick days may be unavoidable. Flexibility may help in dealing with these issues.
- Consider the transportation needs of homeless parents when planning school meetings and parent-teacher conferences.
- Tardiness may exclude the homeless child from participating in a school breakfast program. Flexibility in the serving hours or setting aside breakfast for eating at a later time may help in accommodating homeless children.
- If lack of sleep is an issue, arrange for the student to have a quiet place for a nap during the day.
- If homeless parents cannot attend parent-teacher conferences due to lack of child care, try to help them make arrangements for such care to be provided.
- Homeless children have opinions and feelings about their situation. Ask questions. Their insights into poverty, homelessness, and welfare may be powerful to others.
- Many low-income parents fear teachers. They themselves may not have a high school completion. They may also consider teachers to be the source of reports to child welfare authorities, etc.

Other Help

Your parent/teacher or volunteer organizations can also play an important part in the education of homeless children by:

- Planning for volunteer story hours for preschoolers and school-age children at home shelters.
- Collecting and donating books and magazines to the shelter.
- Collecting and donating clothing to help homeless children fit in with peers in the local school.
- Collecting and donating school supplies for homeless children and youth.
- Having a volunteer accompany parents when they register their children for school.
- Seeing that descriptions of all available educational programs -- including adult, special education, vocational, and alternative education courses -- are posted at home shelters.
- Keeping in close contact with other community agencies serving the children and their families.
- Arranging for literacy or English as a second language tutoring for parents at the shelter.



Ultimate Objectives

Ultimately, our objectives for these children are to help them:

- Learn how to learn.
- Set goals for themselves.
- Believe in themselves.
- Monitor their own success.
- Feel they have stability in their lives at school.

Your Questions

If you need help in solving school-related issues of homeless children, have questions or comments, or wish more information, feel free to contact:

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